Teacher Education for High Poverty Schools: The National Exceptional Teachers for Disadvantaged Schools Program

A vital element to improve outcomes for disadvantaged students is outstanding teachers. A reality, however, is that teacher graduates in the top quartile of academic scores are far less likely to accept positions in tough urban, regional, rural and remote schools. Further, because high poverty schools can be challenging environments, these teachers are retained for much shorter periods of time. In response to this challenge, the National Exceptional Teachers for Disadvantaged Schools program (NETDS) creates a pathway for the highest quality pre-service teachers to be fully prepared, professionally and personally, for roles within high poverty schools. The program identifies the highest-achieving mainstream preservice teachers in university programs across the country and offers them a specialised curriculum and supported practicum experience in a network of disadvantaged partner schools. By working closely with government, philanthropy and partner schools, the program also works to channel these exceptional pre-service teachers into employment in schools where they will have the greatest impact. Its initial results have been exceptional: over 90% of graduates are now employed as teachers in high poverty schools. This paper will discuss their research on how they are working to build the infrastructure and capacity for research on innovations that prepare teachers for 21st century schools in the Australian context.

A vital element in improving outcomes for disadvantaged students is providing them with an outstanding teacher. However, the reality is that Australian teacher graduates in the top quartile of academic scores (and their counterparts around the world) are far less likely to accept positions in high-poverty, tough schools in urban, regional, rural and remote areas. Further, because these schools can be challenging environments, the early-career teachers who are employed stay for much shorter periods than at less challenging schools..

The Exceptional Teachers for Disadvantaged Schools (ETDS) program has been running since 2009, when we acted on what we came to believe was a serious and growing issue: that the ‘best’ of our teacher education graduates were being courted and snapped up by more wealthy government, independent and private ‘leafy green suburbs’ schools. The graduate destination data from our university between 2007 and 2009 showed that the schools where children and families already had the most social capital and the best resources were also getting the majority of the young, bright and talented teachers we were graduating. The rest of our graduates were good too, of course, but those who achieved outstanding results – not

only in their coursework, but also on their practicum reports and on their final Education Queensland suitability rankings – rarely ended up teaching in low socio-economic status (SES) schools. Those who did enter low-SES schools publicly reported feeling unprepared, like a deer in the headlights. Other than a few lectures on race, class and gender, and one compulsory Indigenous education unit, they had had little or no preparation to familarise them with the effects of poverty, or to help them acquire the skills, knowledge and attributes they would need to teach in these high-poverty communities. At times, we knew exactly which of our preservice teachers openly demonstrated a desire to empower marginalized families, children and young people. But it didn't much matter that we knew. There was little structure either within their existing course or within the state education system that could target or prepare these preservice teachers, and hence, they were lost to us. We understood that good teachers make a difference in children's lives (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Hattie, 2004); however, we were faced with data that showed that many of the most disadvantaged communities had the least experienced, least prepared teachers, and employment in these schools was seen by many teachers, and indeed, even the system itself, as undesirable. Low socio-economic schools were perceived as somewhere you taught until you had served enough time to be parachuted back into what was described by one teacher as "an easier gig". It is not surprising, therefore, that working in these schools was interpreted by many teachers as punishment, and that teacher turnover and attrition rates within these schools was extremely high.

In designing ETDS, we had the advantage of a supportive Dean and Faculty, and as a mainstream teacher education program, we also had a conduit for change within the existing structure of the course. With a very small amount of seed money, we gained permission to invite the top 5% of our Primary and Secondary preservice teachers to participate for the last two years of their four-year B.Ed in a program that would prepare them to teach in low socio-

economic schools. In Queensland, low-SES or high-poverty schools exist in urban, rural, regional and remote settings, some of which have high populations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Pacifica, refugee, and underemployed mainstream white residents. We siphoned the ETDS group into one tutorial in our mainstream socio-cultural foundation subject and taught this subject through the lens of poverty and disadvantage. This modified curriculum became the site where relevant theory was learned that could be applied in their practical teaching experiences. We supervised each of the ETDS students' subsequent practicums and their final internship, which were organized to be in low-SES schools. Over the five years ETDS has been running, we have constantly modified the program, which now involves regular social 'Yaks after Prac', field trips to participating schools, mini-conferences, special 'just in time' sessions to further discuss poverty and disadvantage amongst other topics, active social networking, and publishing with students as they become teacher-researchers. Over time, we have developed strong relationships with principals and schools, many of which give employment preference to our graduates. Because of the excellent results of the ETDS program, our Education Department takes the program seriously, offering access to data and consulting on issues such as quality teaching. In many ways, the program is simple: we take great preservice teachers, we light a fire in their bellies, giving them both theory and highly mentored exposure on field placements, and then we intervene to help them gain employment in the high-poverty schools that are crying out for quality teachers. We have now graduated over 60 ETDS teachers, and another two cohorts are in progress. Over 90% of this group is now employed in low socio-economic schools. In 2008, prior to the graduation of our first group, only 35% of our top graduates ended up in such high-poverty settings. For these graduates, what used to be the least preferred schools are now their first choice of employment. We have data examining ETDS employment destinations and because the program is ongoing, we have a growing opportunity to engage in

longitudinal research around the experiences of this select group of early-career teachers. In particular, we are interested in their leadership and the impact of quality teaching in these settings.

The program was designed to put the context of poverty at the forefront of the teacher-education curriculum in one university, but because of its success, it is also affecting policy within a number of Faculties of Education across Australia. A great deal changed for the ETDS in 2013. First, the program received philanthropic funding to upscale nationally and won an Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) award for its contribution to teacher education. Then we brought two other universities on board (University of New England and University of Newcastle) for what is now the NETDS (the National Exceptional Teachers for Disadvantaged Schools program). In 2014, we will have three new universities offering NETDS programs in their B.Ed courses, and over the next three years, the program will continue to expand. Now, in the fifth year of the ETDS, we can report on the outcomes of some of our research, which provides evidence that mainstream Faculties of Education have plenty of talented preservice teachers, and suggests that there is little need for programs such as Teach for Australia, which look outside Faculties of Education for untrained teachers.

The Challenges

The challenges to teacher education, as for education in general, are exacerbated by a conservative government agenda (many would say obsession) with test-based accountability. On the positive side, the goals of the Melbourne Declaration (MCEEYA, 2008) stress the importance of “focusing on school improvement in low-socio-economic communities” and “providing targeted support to young people who experience educational disadvantage”. There are currently numerous approaches in place to achieve these goals, such as explicit

strategies to attract and support high-quality principals, school leaders and teachers to schools in disadvantaged communities. Concern about the impact of educational disadvantage on student learning can be observed at the policy level in the considerable allocation of federal and state government funding targeting low socio-economic status participation (the Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program) and targeted educational reform via the COAG-led National Partnership Agreements (Teacher Quality and Low SES School Communities: 2014–15). Gonski's *Review of funding for schooling: Final report* (Gonski et al., 2011) elevated into public and political discourse the critical link between socio-economic disadvantage and students' educational success, participation and performance. Gonski's report recommended important school funding reforms to address these problems, but it has since been watered down by Education Minister Christopher Pyne's belief that equity problems are exaggerated; at one point, Pyne called Gonski a "conski" (Knott, 2014). Meanwhile, the equity gap in Australian schools grows.

NETDS prepares new teachers in a challenging climate in which economic rationalism and new prescriptive curriculum measures are being imposed. This impacts especially on schools with high numbers of disadvantaged children (including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Pacifica and refugee children, as well as children from other disadvantaged families) whose test scores are perceived to be 'bringing us down'. Australian PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) rankings for mathematics, reading and science are falling. As a result of this decline, particularly in numeracy and literacy, a new public discourse is evident in the introduction and positioning as panacea of programs such as Direct Instruction and its companion Explicit Instruction, which are prescriptive, highly scaffolded programs purchased from the US that aim to raise literacy skills. The 2012 PISA results indicate that by Year 9, students in the lowest SES quartile are two and a half years behind those in the highest quartile (OECD, 2013).

Proposed solutions are both highly prescriptive and target an evidence-based shift in benchmarked test scores. In Queensland, for instance, the government is now signing state schools up to the 'Great Results Guarantee' – money schools receive only if their students achieve the National Minimum Standard for literacy and numeracy for their year level or have an evidence-based plan, developed by the school, in place to address their specific learning difficulties (Education Queensland, 2014). This is not the first time that the accountability of teachers has been linked to high-stakes testing of students (NAPLAN). Unfortunately, these test results are decontextualized on the pretence that great teachers will make an immediate difference irrespective of the impact of disadvantage such as social class and race. While many of us know this is an absurdity, the Great Results Guarantee risks making teachers accountable for things over which they have no control. This discourse, which is not unique to Australia, opens up the potential for new conversations surrounding teacher quality: conversations that do not as easily co-opt notions of 'quality' as simply being related to student scores. In the light of what appears to be internationally shared political and economic pressures, we see an urgent need for multinational research surrounding quality teaching in high-poverty settings that target the complex ways effective teachers make a difference in young people's lives.

Teacher education in general also faces a number of new pressures. In the US and Britain, *Teach for America* and *Teach* have appealed to public fears about quality teaching and have gained considerable political traction in changing the way teachers are prepared for their role. This has been true to a much lesser extent in Australia, where *Teach for Australia* exists in only a few states, and has faced considerable resistance from teacher unions and some Faculties of Education. Concurrently, private corporations are increasingly finding new paths into teacher education producing curriculum and resources, providing professional development, and conducting research. As education (and schools) become "service

commodities" (S. J. Ball, 2012, p. 24), teacher education is increasingly at risk of being 'bought', not for purposes unrelated to equity and social justice, but rather on the basis of market forces. New business models in the form of corporations thus present themselves as new experts in the field of education. Unsurprisingly, this looks attractive to a public that has been informed by panic discourses about the state of teacher education, which is not only blamed for a fall in teacher quality, but is also accused by current Minister of Education Christopher Pyne of being "not up to scratch" and too theoretical, ideological and "faddish" (Knott, 2014). Such is the nature of this panic that in Australia, we are currently conducting yet another national inquiry into teacher education; there has been at least one major state or national inquiry each year for the past 30 years (Dinham, 2013, p. 91). Unlike in Finland, which is universally held up as a model of equitable education (Sahlberg, 2010), research-based teacher education in Australia is increasingly under pressure to instead focus on merely teaching future teachers to be better deliverers of a national standardised curriculum.

The experiences in both North America (Cochran-Smith et al., 2012) and Australia (Dinham, 2013) demonstrate that the task of preparing and retaining teachers specifically for settings that include many children who are living in poverty is far from straightforward. It is clear, for example, that teacher graduates in the top quartile of academic scores are far less likely to accept positions in low-SES, often hard-to-staff, urban, regional and remote schools (Darling-Hammond, 2006) and the rate of burnout and turnover of teachers in these schools is high. It would also appear that the issue is not one of generating more teachers, but rather preparing and retaining quality teachers:

> [Although] many [teachers] are idealistic and wish to make a difference in the world; … without the tutelage of experienced, culturally responsive mentors, over 50 per

> cent will be gone [from high-poverty schools] in two years, and over 80 per cent will be gone after three years. (Delpit, 2012)

The impact of this 'problem', and the need for the most effective teachers to work in the schools that need them most, has been the centre of much recent discussion. The core issue has two inseparable parts: these schools must attract effective teachers, but the teachers must also be better prepared to teach within them and better supported once they do.

Our current economic climate means that high-poverty schools, and the teachers who work in them, are experiencing new hardships. The 'quality teacher' discourse continues to dominate policy and research, emphasised through such bodies as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). However, the definitions of quality teaching can easily be co-opted. Who defines this quality, and the way that definition affects both teacher education programs and employment practices, present challenges. As Stephen Dinham writes, the quality-teaching movement is easily 'diverted and disrupted' (2013, p. 92). This, then, is the time for researchers around the globe to collaborate in larger, more productive ways, making sure the outcomes of scholarly research are disseminated both widely and publicly.

What Teachers Need: Knowledge, skills, dispositions

The NETDS program is grounded in the belief that effective teachers for high-poverty schools require abilities in three well-substantiated areas: deep content knowledge, well-tuned pedagogical skills, and demonstrated attributes that prove their understanding and commitment to social justice. These separate, though interrelated, fields are well documented in the scholarly research on teaching in urban schools (Obidah & Howard, 2005), culturally responsive teaching and culturally relevant teaching (Sleeter, 2008; Villegas, 2007), teaching against the grain (Cochran-Smith, 1991) and teaching for social justice (Price, 2012; Villegas,

2007). The NETDS program draws on the extensive international research identifying the best ways to prepare teachers for increasingly diverse and complex school environments. For instance, Sleeter (2008) explains that teacher education for equity and democracy rests on three pillars: "preparation for everyday realities and complexities of schools and classrooms; content knowledge and professional theoretical knowledge that universities can provide; and dialog with communities in which schools are situated, a crucial pillar that too often is ignored" (Sleeter, 2008, p. 1948). Cochran-Smith explains the factors that policy makers and others claim are critical to teacher quality, including:

> strong academic background; solid subject-matter knowledge; preparation at a high-caliber institution; commitment to teaching; first-year teaching placement aligned with the teacher's subject field; certification area; and experience during the student teaching period; and designation of a formal mentor with some experience. (Cochran-Smith, 2012, p. 111)

Following both Cochran-Smith and Sleeter, the NETDS program adopts a process that focuses on academic ability "plus" (Sleeter, 2008, p. 1949). Academic ability is used as an initial selection tool for participation in the program, however, it is supplemented over the two years by extensive mentoring, multiple field experience (practicum) in low socio-economic school settings, theory-building and crucial "generative change" (A. Ball, 2009). Generativity is central to the program, defined by Ball as

> the teachers' ability to continually add to their understanding by connecting their personal and professional knowledge with the knowledge that they gain from their students to produce or originate knowledge that is useful to them in pedagogical problem solving and in meeting the educational needs of their students. (A. Ball, 2009, p. 47)

In Australia, the research on teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (who make up the poorest of the Australian population) also focuses on knowledges, skills and attributes. Various researchers have noted that the vast 'gap' between non-Indigenous and Indigenous outcomes in education cannot be closed without significant changes in teaching methods. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children must receive a combination of challenging curriculum equal to that provided to more privileged non-Indigenous Australians (Sarra, 2011) and well-informed teaching pedagogies (Price, 2012). And above all, they must have teachers who have high expectations and a belief that their students can achieve, without the deficit presuppositions (some might even say racism) that leads to poor educational programs (Luke et al., 2013).

Research Outcomes of NETDS to Date

One snapshot of the NETDS program's measure of impact is found in our employment destination data (which we referred to previously). It demonstrates two important facts: that high-poverty schools want to employ specially trained, highly skilled teachers, and that intervention programs such as NETDS help to complete the employment cycle. The national scaling up of NETDS means we are now in a position to conduct larger-scale longitudinal research based on NETDS data from multiple universities. Our data-sets to date are contained within our own university and include five years of both surveys and interviews with principals, participants and early-career teachers. We know about 'default' moments, when teachers revert to attitudes towards their students or families that the NETDS program has helped them to recognize as 'deficit' thinking. Of course, our emphasis on providing them with the skills to recognize these moments, and importantly, to ask for help, means that we can intervene. Classroom observations and field notes while ETDS preservice teachers are on practicum inform us on everything from effective relationship building to the deep teaching

of content. ETDS participants keep journals that are both informative, and provide the basis for our ongoing modified curriculum.

We have also been collecting data for five years on the educational and social backgrounds of our participants. Because teachers are overwhelmingly white and middle class, we have been heavily involved in the More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers initiative, a nationwide attempt to bring a greater number of Indigenous teachers into the profession. This year we have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander preservice teachers in our program, as well as participants who themselves come from low socio-economic backgrounds. We have been writing and publishing with some of these participants to learn more about their experiences and the impact the program is having on them. Our data points to the fact that while our teaching workforce needs to be much more diverse, notions of social justice can be 'taught' and enhanced, even to middle-class teachers with no experience of disadvantage. A particular area of interest in our research is exploring the fact that some of our participants had no idea at the beginning of the NETDS program that they would ultimately be such passionate advocates for marginalized students in high-poverty settings. In fact, prior to joining NETDS, many of our participants openly state their intention to graduate and teach in private schools. We are also engaged in ongoing data collection around the impact of teachers with high levels of content knowledge in high-poverty schools. We have had to counteract criticism that NETDS selects participants primarily on an elitist basis of a high GPA. We know, of course, that GPA is not the only indicator of quality teaching. Qualities such as empathy, resilience, a sense of social justice, personal background, self-efficacy and personal experience working in low socio-economic settings are all perceived to have an impact on how effective a teacher is in the classroom. However, in line with research on quality teaching, such as Cochran-Smith (1991), Villegas (2007), Hattie (2004) and many others, our data from schools indicates that many low-SES school principals believe the ability to teach

intellectually rigorous content knowledge to students who lack cultural capital is a critical element in turning around the poverty cycle. It is all very well to 'believe' any child can be an engineer; however, unless somewhere along the line they are taught high-level mathematics, then these high expectations become merely magical thinking. In fact, we would argue that these expectations may even set children up for failure.

Conclusion

Despite the large effect of teachers on student performance, disadvantaged schools find it difficult to attract, employ, support and retain the highest quality teachers. NETDS has shown that a targeted teacher education program can ensure that teachers receive the prerequisite knowledge, skills, dispositions and exposure they need for working in schools with disadvantaged students. NETDS has also shown the importance of providing mentoring programs for novice teachers; developing supportive working conditions to improve teacher effectiveness and increase teacher retention in disadvantaged schools; and the need for adequate financial and career incentives to attract and retain high-quality teachers in disadvantaged schools.

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